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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 ALGIERS 001810

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PTER](#) [AG](#)

SUBJECT: NATIONAL RECONCILIATION: DO ALGERIANS SUPPORT BOUTEFLIKA'S PROPOSAL?

REF: A. ALGIERS 1661

[B.](#) ALGIERS 1702

Classified By: Richard W. Erdman for reasons 1.4(b) and (d)

SUMMARY AND COMMENT

[¶](#)1. (C) President Bouteflika is poised to win a strong majority in the September 29 referendum on his proposed Charter for Peace and National Reconciliation. Through a carefully crafted political and media strategy, he has framed the proposal in a way that makes it hard to oppose; orchestrated a pro-Charter campaign using presidential coalition parties, prominent personalities, former terrorists, and various labor, civic, and sports groups; and directed a drumbeat of pro-reconciliation messages in the mostly receptive press and on government-controlled television and radio. He has also pointedly argued that the Charter represents the only possible "equilibrium of interests" at this time and that, having fought and defeated terrorism on its own, Algeria does need outsiders to tell it how to pursue national reconciliation. In the process, a sense of inevitability of the passage of the "reconciliation" Charter has been created and any inclination to seriously debate the content of what is in effect a partial amnesty for those with blood on their hands has been damped.

[¶](#)2. (C) For sure, some press commentaries, human rights groups, terrorist victims groups, and other NGOs have criticized the proposed Charter as providing for impunity at the expense of justice and truth-telling. For the most part, however, public and private discussion has centered not on substance, but on whether the Charter will work. Will pardoning or not prosecuting those with blood on their hands in the end promote reconciliation, help reintegrate former integrist elements into society, and dramatically isolate and weaken terrorist remnants still in the maquis? Bouteflika himself has been careful to say that his proposal will not solve all the problems and that real reconciliation will require more time. We agree. At best, the Charter will be an interim measure passed by a people weary after more than a decade of terrorism and willing to hope that, whatever the Charter's faults, it will help bring an end to their national nightmare. (End Summary and Comment)

THE POLITICS OF THE REFERENDUM

[¶](#)3. (C) In a speech delivered August 14, President Bouteflika outlined his long-awaited vision for National Reconciliation (Ref B). A day later, the GOA published the Charter for Peace and National Reconciliation, which discussed the parameters for implementing the plan, though not some of the legal details. The benchmark of success for Bouteflika's gambit will, in the short term, be the success of the referendum both in positive votes and voter turnout. Another measure will be whether it is followed by rolling back the national state of emergency in a return to normalcy. Terrorist elements will not be completely eliminated, but Bouteflika hopes that by passing the referendum, Algeria will put the violence of the 1990's behind it, encourage Algerians abroad to return home, and persuade the remaining terrorists still operating in the country of the futility of continuing their struggle. In his first day of campaigning for the charter in Skikda, Bouteflika reiterated his message, "Never, never again. We will do everything so that terrorism won't find its way to Algeria." The fight against terror will continue against "those who want to keep the country in darkness."

[¶](#)4. (U) Madani Mezrag, the former Islamic Salvation Army (AIS) leader hailed August 23 the President's initiative and the Charter for Peace and National Reconciliation. While making no apologies for his previous actions and claiming the AIS had been engaged in "a just war," Merzag said, "We are with President Bouteflika today and tomorrow, not because his name is Bouteflika, but because he is the initiator of a political project of reconciliation." While regretting that members of the banned party Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) are "forbidden from any political activity," he added: "Politics is not the objective of Muslims; we have other places to express ourselves such as associations, our families and

society in general." Based on his contacts with armed terrorist groupd, he expected 80% of the remaining "200 terrorists" will lay down their arms after the referendum. Even some members of the GSPC, such as a group called Hooumat Ed-Daawa Es-Salafiya, will be "receptive" to the Charter," he said. Mezrag's sole criticism was that the FIS was portrayed as the only party to bear responsibility for the crisis. He countered that "The former regime in place was the one responsible for the crisis."

PRESS REACTION VARIED AND OPEN

15. (U) Press coverage has been extensive, with reaction ranging from positive to negative, with varying degrees of skepticism but most in the end, like the public, hoping the President's proposal will prove effective, *faute de mieux*. El Moudjahid, the French-language official daily, provided a blitz of positive coverage highlighting support for the plan. L'Expression highlighted prospective beneficiaries of National Reconciliation by publishing daily interviews with and comments by former Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) and Islamic Salvation Army (AIS) leaders. The latter issued a statement favorable to the National Reconciliation Initiative, even though they are to be excluded from all political activity, calling it a "half solution." La Tribune and Le Quotidien d'Oran, two elite French-language dailies, expressed skepticism about National Reconciliation and its end results. The two French language papers which most openly criticized Bouteflika's project were the opposition Liberte and the tabloidish Le Soir d'Algerie. They pointed out that "the notion of justice" is completely absent from the charter, and that the President's proposal amounted to "a security solution" more than anything else. Both of these papers insisted that the compensation proposed for the victims of "the National Tragedy" were overly financial. Since Algeria was currently "a country with means" throwing money at the problem was the painless solution. Both newspapers complained that the President did not "tackle the roots of the crisis," namely social injustice, corruption, and mismanagement. El Watan, the leading French-language daily, has expressed skepticism and carried some critical articles but has neither endorsed nor rejected the Charter.

16. (U) In the Arabic-language press, the highest circulating daily, El Khabar, did its best to present objectively the President's project by interviewing all parties concerned. Unlike some papers which openly favored the "pros," El Khabar also presented the "cons." The other Arabic papers like El Bilad (close to the MSP), Sawt El Ahrar (close to the FLN), and Al Shorouk El Youmi did not show the same objectivity. These papers openly expressed full support for National Reconciliation.

17. (SBU) Unsurprisingly, the broadcast media, which are owned and operated by the Government, were entirely supportive. Both television and radio stations aired spots encouraging a "yes" vote. Three public-service ads now air frequently on Algerian TV. The first spot shows the Algerian flag. In the background, the song, "On Forgiveness," sung by a famous Algerian singer, is played. The second advertisement centers around writing on the screen which says, "From civil concord to national reconciliation for the sake of Algeria: September 29, 2005 referendum." (Posters bearing these words have appeared all over Algiers as well.) The third and most poignant ad shows a youth who says to the camera, "My father has been killed by terrorists, but I think that the time has come to forgive." The radio spots largely feature songs on national reconciliation mixed with testimonies from victims and all with the same voice-over conclusion, "We have to do this for Algeria. For our country, let us vote for national reconciliation." No coverage has been afforded in electronic media to the dissenters. Post contacts note that average Algerians overwhelmingly rely on radio and television for their news, so the favorable coverage of the initiative in the electronic media should have a direct impact on the outcome of the referendum.

POLITICAL PARTIES MOSTLY FAVORABLE

18. (U) For the most part, the political parties, both those comprising the Presidential Alliance (FLN, RND, MSP) and the opposition, united behind Bouteflika's speech and the Charter for Peace and National Reconciliation. The following are notable quotes from statements or communiquees issued by the main political party:

-- National Liberation Front (FLN) - "It is an extremely laudable project, and is for sure the only way out from the crisis."

-- Democratic National Rally (RND) - "The RND will completely back the President's project."

-- Society of Peace Movement (MSP) - "The national

reconciliation charter will definitely turn the page on the black decade."

-- Opposition Islamist Islah Party (National Reform Movement Party) - "We welcome the project with satisfaction, but want to point out that we were the first ones to talk about national reconciliation."

-- Far left Labor Party - "The Labor Party will call on all its members to vote for the charter, with the hope that stability will come back to the country."

-- Berber-dominated opposition Front des Forces Socialist (FFS) - "The Charter is a very confusing document, which looks more like a compromise between the decision-makers than anything else."

-- Rally for Democracy and Culture (RCD) - The leader of the small Berber-based party opposes.

NGO's AND FAMILIES OF VICTIMS AGAINST PROPOSAL

19. (C) Many of the non-governmental organizations (NGO) representing the interests of the families of "disparus," or the "disappeared," many of whom vanished or were killed by security forces during the 1990's, disagreed strongly with Bouteflika's speech. Even more critical were the families of victims of terrorism. The victim's families see themselves as twice victimized since they have lost a relative and feel their right to justice has been denied. The following NGO's provided us reaction on the Charter:

-- SOS Disparus (State) - "Truth should be a priority for the President; nothing is said about telling us what happened to our loved ones."

-- Algerian League for the Defense of Human Rights - "The President of the Republic has exculpated the army and the security services from any responsibility for crimes against humanity by declaring the State "responsible, but not guilty," which is a judicial heresy. All criminals are equal before the law, which a matter of legality and not morality."

-- Djazairouna - "After the implementation of the Civil Concord, we expected to know more about its results, but nothing of the kind happened. What is more shocking today is that in the charter the notion of justice is completely absent."

-- Somoud - "How can the President talk about compensation when the 'prejudice' has not been defined? We are not against peace but this charter is more a charter about impunity than anything else. Did terrorists acknowledge their crimes? It is for us, the victims, to forgive these people, and that can be done only when the latter admit the harm that they have caused to us. It looks like the President is more concerned about reconciling the security forces and the terrorists groups than 'taking real care of us.'"

10. (C) NGOs representing families of the victims are launching an operation called "A Caravan Against Impunity," which will stop at cities and villages to argue that the document proposed for ratification is a charter for impunity, and not for peace, by "washing" the deeds of the security forces on the one hand, and not holding accountable on the other those responsible for thousands of deaths, abductions, and rapes. The NGOs are seeking support from international NGOs and institutions in their campaign.

VOTER REACTION MIXED

11. (C) According to our contacts in Algiers, Annaba and Oran, the citizens of these large urban centers are skeptical as to whether the Charter will prove to be a decisive blow against terrorist remnants or merely a short-term palliative to a broader societal problem. Though the overall concept of national reconciliation was outlined in Bouteflika's speech and the Charter, the details of the impact on society are still not clear. According to most Embassy contacts, Algerians were expecting a more straightforward text, with greater detail. As one teacher from Algiers said, "At least the text on Civil Concord was clearer since we knew that blood crimes were excluded from it, but this time no real details were given."

12. (C) Despite the fact that collective massacres, rapes and attacks with explosives in public places are excluded as pardonable crimes under the Charter, judging by press reports and the reaction of Embassy contacts, Algerians remain unsure how to assimilate those individuals who killed but did not commit one of the three excluded crimes. According to several Embassy sources, many Algerians believe that

Bouteflika, in addressing those affected by the "national tragedy," did not make a distinction between the victims of terrorists and the terrorists who killed individual victims. In the Charter, Bouteflika said he wants, "... to be appointed to ask in the name of the nation the forgiveness of all the victims of the national tragedy and thus seal peace and national reconciliation." Algerians, maintain these sources, believe that the President is asking for a blank check, giving him too much authority and power to decide this issue.

ERDMAN